

The Iditarod Sled Dog Race



Preview Vocabulary:

1. **musher**: a person who travels over the snow with a sled dog team
2. **tundra**: a treeless plain especially of arctic regions having a permanently frozen layer below the surface soil and plant life made up mostly of mosses, lichens, herbs, and very small shrubs
3. **the elements**: weather conditions, especially severe weather
4. **endurance**: the ability to withstand hardship or adversity over a prolonged period of time
5. **antiserum**: a liquid in the blood containing antibodies produced in an infected animal or human that can be injected into an individual to make him/her immune to the same disease

Fill in the blanks using the above words in context.

1. I was able to increase my athletic _____ more and more each day that I trained for the marathon.
2. As if rock climbing wasn't difficult enough, I also had to battle against _____ when a thunderstorm rolled in.
3. An _____ was obtained from the blood of a survivor of the disease to be injected into others who were less likely to survive from the disease.
4. The _____ yelled "mush" to his team to tell them to run.
5. In the winter, the Arctic _____ is extremely cold and often very windy with very little human activity.

Can you relate?

Think of a time that you had to battle against the elements. In other words, think of a time that the weather caused a challenge for you. Describe it.

Think of a time that you had to have endurance. Describe it.

What is your opinion of using animals in sports and entertainment? Explain. You don't have to approve of all uses nor disapprove of all uses as you may feel differently depending on the situation. (Need ideas? How about betting on racing horses or dogs, rodeo events, animals performing at Sea World, watching dogs in agility or frisbee competitions, riding horses competitively or for fun?)

The Iditarod Sled Dog Race

By Katie Auer

The Iditarod Trail Sled Dog Race is known as "The Last Great Race on Earth." It starts every year on the first weekend of March. In this sled dog race, "**mushers**" and their teams of 12-16 dogs cover a distance of approximately 1,000 miles on the Iditarod National Historical Trail from Anchorage to Nome, Alaska. The race typically takes nine to seventeen days to complete. The Iditarod Trail has many twists and turns, hills, steep banks along deep gorges, long stretches across the **tundra**, frozen rivers, dirt and boulders protruding through the snow, and high mountain passes making for one of the most grueling competitions ever.

In March 2012, the high temperatures ranged from about 10°F to 30°F and the lows ranged from about -10°F to 10°F. Temperatures vary from year to year and even from day to day. It also depends on where you are on the long and varied trail. Wind is also a factor. It may get very windy at times making it feel even colder than it actually is. For example, in 1973, the year of the first Iditarod race, the wind-chill hit 130 degrees below zero. Blizzards can also pop up unexpectedly. Too much snow is challenging. But even too little snow can be an issue. Sled dogs perform best when the temperatures are around zero degrees and when the snow is fluffy. If the temperatures get too much higher above 30°F, the dogs may overheat or injure their paws on the bumpy terrain where the snow has melted or has become slushy. Not only is the Iditarod Trail Sled Dog Race a test of **endurance**, but it is also a battle against **the elements**.

Two trails are used for the race; one gets used in even-numbered years and the other gets used in odd-numbered years. Having two trails allows small villages along the route to have to deal with the impact of a large group of mushers, press, and volunteers only every other year rather than every year. It also allows the race to pass through more villages, including the ghost town of Iditarod. The northern trail is 1,112 miles and the southern trail is 1,131 miles though the actual portion used for the race is around 975-1000 miles and varies from year to year depending on conditions. The distance "as the crow flies" is about 650 miles. There are 26-27 checkpoints during the race, places for teams to get food, veterinary care, and rest. The race is not over until the last musher has reached Nome and is off the trail.

The trails were created in 1908. Before airplanes and snowmobiles, dog sleds were the main form of transportation in many areas of Alaska. The need for the trails became especially apparent when many settlers came to mine gold in the area during the gold rush in the late 1890s and early 1900s. The network of trails from Anchorage to Nome were originally used as mail routes, connections between Native American villages, supply delivery routes, a way for priests, ministers, and judges to reach people in remote villages, and lifesaving highways. In 1925, a diphtheria epidemic broke out in Nome and surrounding communities. Sled dog teams delivered the lifesaving diphtheria **antiserum**.

It takes approximately nine to seventeen days to complete the Iditarod race. The first Iditarod winner in 1973 took 20 days to complete the race, but since then, mushers and their dogs have improved their skills, equipment, and veterinary care gaining more speed over the years. The winner gets a prize that varies from year to year. In 2012, the winner received \$50,400 and a new truck. The other contestants do not go home empty-handed. Subsequent finishers receive a little less money decreasing from \$46,500 for second place, \$42,900 for third place down to \$1,500 for 30th place while each additional finisher receives \$1,049. Additionally, everyone gets smaller prizes. The race in 1973 had 22 mushers whereas the race in 2012 had 66 mushers. Mushers usually come from Alaska although people from all over the world have been contestants.

Not just any dog can be a sled dog. Sled dogs must be driven, hardy, and athletic. They must have the willingness to make it to the finish line. Some dogs have more desire and willingness to race than others. Sled dogs must not only have strength and speed but also a good attitude. They must be team players. Sled dog teams have leaders. Mushers raise the dogs together and will watch to see which dogs truly want to lead and which dogs are more hesitant to lead but are happy to

follow. The dogs communicate with each other nonverbally. Their body language, bristling of the hair, arching backs, ear movements, showing of the teeth, tail movements, and laying down with paws in the air are all as telling as growling and barking. When mushers bring puppies into the group, the older more experienced dogs will reprimand them if they are not focusing or are barking too much and will put their noses to the puppies' noses to tell them they are doing a good job. Puppies typically reach the important milestone of getting harnessed for the first time when they are six months old. Originally, Alaskan Malamutes were most often used as sled dogs while today the Alaskan Husky is the most popular breed.

Sled dogs must be healthy and well-prepared for the race. During the race, mushers must carefully observe the dogs to see if they are tired, hungry, or injured and look for signs of not wanting to keep going. Dogs that are pushed too hard can become seriously injured or sick, even to the point of death. The musher must complete the race with at least six dogs on the towline pulling the sled. Therefore, a musher can remove a dog that should no longer be in the race. Any dogs displaying aggressive behavior may be withdrawn from the race.

Sled dogs must continue to stay healthy during the race. Dogs must have a thick coat to stay warm. Generally, sled dogs are very comfortable in the cold temperatures and will heat up quickly when running. However, when temperatures drop below zero, dogs wear jackets and booties. Mushers are required to carry at least eight booties for each dog which are protective no matter what the temperature. Mushers may even provide massages and paw rubs. Dogs must get plenty of rest. Their diet is also important. They must get plenty of protein and fats (from dry dog food, fish, and a variety of meats) in order to provide the immense amount of energy needed to pull a sled. Racing dogs may consume as many as 10,000 calories a day during the Iditarod race but less than 2,000 calories on non-racing days. Of course they need plenty of water too.

Throughout the year, many mushers provide the dogs the best diets in optimum quantities in order for them to remain athletic, not too skinny, and not overweight. Mushers also require their dogs to do rigorous training throughout the year. Additionally, each day of the year, many mushers are known to treat their dogs with a lot of love, affection, and care. According to some passionate mushers, sled dogging is a lifestyle, not just an event. It is a lifetime pursuit of excellence.



Reading Comprehension Questions:

1. The distance of the Iditarod Trail "as the crow flies" is about 650 miles. The mushers with their team of dogs travel about 1,000 miles. What does the expression "as the crow flies" mean?
 - A. In the time it takes the crow to get to the finish line, the sled dog team will have traveled 650 miles.
 - B. In the time it takes the sled dog team to get to the finish line, the crow will have traveled 650 miles.
 - C. Because the crow does not have to follow the trail and is able to fly in a straight line from the starting point to the finish line, it could get to the finish line in a shorter distance than the sled dog team could.
 - D. If the crow were in the race, it would make frequent stops and would never actually make it to the finish line. It would probably only be able to go 650 miles in all.

2. Which of the following statements is an opinion?
 - A. Dogs train throughout the year to prepare for this rigorous race.
 - B. Using any other breed than an Alaskan Malamute is a poor choice.
 - C. Sled dogs must not only be strong and fast but they must also be willing and cooperative.
 - D. The Iditarod Race is known as "The Last Great Race on Earth."

3. What is true about the two different trails used in the Iditarod Race?
 - A. The contestants on one trail race against contestants on the other trail.
 - B. One trail leaves Anchorage and the other trail goes back to Anchorage.
 - C. Contestants travel on the northern trail to the halfway checkpoint and then travel to the finish line on the southern trail.
 - D. Having two trails used on alternate years means that small villages along the trails will be impacted by large groups of people passing through every other year rather than every year.

4. Why are sled dogs no longer the main form of transportation in many areas of Alaska?
 - A. Many people feel that using sled dogs for transportation is cruel.
 - B. People use snowmobiles and airplanes as the main forms of transportation.
 - C. People wanted to use the sled dogs for races so there weren't enough sled dogs left for transportation.
 - D. Sled dogs must train year-round for the races and must not risk getting injured.

5. Which word could the author have used instead of *grueling* when she wrote, "The Iditarod Trail has many twists and turns, hills, steep banks along deep gorges, long stretches across the tundra, frozen rivers, dirt and boulders protruding through the snow, and high mountain passes making for one of the most grueling competitions ever."
 - A. confusing
 - B. challenging
 - C. annoying
 - D. unachievable

6. According to the selection, the Iditarod Trail has, "...dirt and boulders protruding through the snow, and high mountain passes making for one of the most grueling competitions ever." The word *protruding* means

- A. sticking out from the surrounding surface
- B. sliding down hills onto the trail
- C. covered by snow making them hard to see
- D. forming a blockade

7. In a letter to the editor of an Alaskan newspaper, a person wrote that sled dogs should no longer be used because using sled dogs as transportation would be treating dogs as "snowmobiles with fur." Use a venn diagram to compare and contrast a sled dog and a snowmobile.



Providing Textual Evidence

Often when we read, we make inferences. To make inferences means that we draw logical conclusions that we believe are true based on what we have read. These conclusions that we draw are not stated directly in the text, but we believe that it is safe to assume that they are correct. We should be able to provide textual evidence to support our conclusions. This means that we should be able to point to specific sentences in the text that provide evidence that our conclusions are true.

Directions: Answer the questions below by making inferences based on the text, "The Iditarod Sled Dog Race." Then, provide quotations from the text that provide evidence to support your inferences, or to prove that your conclusions are true. (Make sure to use quotation marks!)

1. Why is the Iditarod Sled Dog Race not held in the summer?

Answer:

Textual Evidence:

2. Does the Iditarod Sled Dog Race draw a lot of people into small villages along the route?

Answer:

Textual Evidence:

3. What would have happened to the Alaskan residents who contracted the diphtheria disease in 1925 if there were no sled dogs?

Answer:

Textual Evidence:

4. Why are all mushers each required to bring one operational cooker and one pot capable of boiling at least three gallons of water at one time?

Answer:

Textual Evidence:

5. When the snow is extremely cold, little snowballs may form between the dog's toes making it uncomfortable and potentially dangerous for the dog to run. Mushers are required to bring booties for the dogs. In what other snow condition would booties be helpful?

Answer:

Textual Evidence:

Evaluating a Claim

According to *The Iditarod Sled Dog Race*, "Not only is the Iditarod Trail Sled Dog Race a test of endurance, but it is also a battle against the elements." The author is making this claim.

Did the author provide enough reasons and evidence to support this claim? _____

Quoting directly from the text, provide 4 reasons/evidence that prove that the claim is true. (Don't forget to use quotation marks!)

Reasons and Evidence:

1.

2.

3.

4.